

Most popular doctor not necessarily best; do a little of research

By Gail Newbold
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Never choose a physician from the yellow pages or because he happens to be well-known or popular, say a number of Utah County physicians.

"Some of the county's most popular doctors are not necessarily its best, and I think that's because so many members of the community are not very astute about how they pick a physician," said Dr. Steve MacArthur, specialist in obstetrics and gynecology, when asked about how a person should choose a physician.

All physicians interviewed said one of the best methods for choosing a physician is to ask the opinions of someone in a related field who has worked with the doctor in question.

"For example, the best way to pick a surgeon is to ask several anesthesiologists, or other operating room personnel such as the nurses," MacArthur said.

Family practitioner Dennis Moore said caution should be used with this method, however, since a person may be misled by certain prejudices.

Patient referral is another good method for choosing your physician, claims Dr. Richard Parkinson, a dermatologist. "Ask your friends if they've had good luck with a certain doctor," he suggested.

"Ask your friends about his bedside manner, and a little about his personality," said Dr. Steven Rowley, otolaryngologist and head and neck surgeon. "Some people want someone who will spend a great deal of time with them, explaining everything, where others want a doctor who is very matter of fact, sees what needs to be done, and does it. It's a matter of personal preference."

Of course, merely asking others how the physician acts will tell you more about how he conducts himself than his actual credentials, Moore said.

Many of the doctors advised people to ask other physicians their

Choosing a doctor

- Ask someone in a related field
- Ask doctors themselves
- Ask doctors' patients
- Ask doctors' wives
- Check with local hospitals
- Inquire with local medical associations
- Get more than one opinion
- Visit several doctors before choosing
- Switch if you're not satisfied

opinions of who's best and who's not.

"I think the most critical thing in medicine is having good judgment," MacArthur said, "so ask the physicians with whom he works whether or not he possesses it."

"I am more than happy to tell anyone who calls, whether a patient of mine or not, who I think is good and who isn't," Rowley said. "I was new here once, too."

Parkinson advises a person to do more than rely on the opinion of one doctor for a referral, since many physicians will refer people to the guys they play golf with. And just because he's a good golfer, doesn't

make him a good physician. "You must have confidence that your doctor is sending you to the very best specialist around."

One doctor advised calling the wives of related physicians, since often their husbands will come home swearing or stomping about a certain doctor they feel is terrible.

Other sources for checking on a doctor's background and capabilities include the local hospital, which will often give a list of recommendations, as well as the state or county medical associations.

These associations report whether or not the physician is in good standing, where he attended medical school, whether he served a residency and whether or not he is board-certified.

Board certification means the doctor has chosen to receive additional specialized training following medical school and has passed a number of extremely difficult examinations and reviews given by the top experts in his field.

Almost every doctor surveyed, however, pointed out that having board certification is not necessarily a guarantee the doctor is good. "I see board-certified doctors who are excellent and board-certified doctors who are terrible," MacArthur said.

"Find out if he's kept up after his certification, since he may have taken the exam years ago," advised Rowley. "At least a board certification says the doctor was competent enough to pass the exam in the first place and that he cared enough to go through it all."

Parkinson said the courts obviously think board certification is important because whenever he has been called to testify in a medical malpractice suit the first thing he is asked is if he is board certified.

Moore advises investing the time and money in a visit with several physicians if necessary to find one you feel comfortable with — before that 11 p.m. emergency occurs when no physician will accept new pa-

tients except through the emergency room in the hospital — which means a much larger bill.

Be wary of the specialist who attempts to treat every medical problem as though he were a family practitioner, Rowley said. "I've noticed many physicians here who seem to exceed the boundaries of what they have been trained for — such as the general surgeon who cares for everything from the common cold to a stomach ache."

"Find a general practitioner who can coordinate all your needs," said Dr. Richard Call II, specialist in arthritis and internal medicine. "The plastic surgeon will say you need a face lift, the orthopedic surgeon says you need your knees operated on, and the surgeon says you need your bladder taken out. Let your family doctor help you decide."

Opinions differ on how important the doctor's personality should be.

"Going to a physician should be a positive experience, and hopefully the physician will be able to make this possible," Moore said. "But he also needs to competently handle the patient's medical needs as well as psychological needs."

"A patient does better with someone he feels rapport with," Rowley said. "If you feel better with someone who has a beard, gray hair, is elderly or just out of school, then fine. But if you pick a physician strictly on the basis of personality, you may find you're not getting the best medical care. The same holds true if you merely pick one because he's the busiest or his price is the lowest — or the highest."

MacArthur put it this way: "It's nice if the physician is pleasant, but that's not what's important. The best cardiovascular surgeon I know of in the United States is the most malignant, mean, ornery man ever, but if my child needed major cardiovascular surgery, I would be thrilled to death to have him as my physician."

Be wary of the doctor who takes emotional advantage of his patients by being overly solicitous and physically attentive in an inappropriate manner.

"Some of the worst obstetricians are the best ego supporters," MacArthur said. "They tell the women how cute their outfits are and all this crap that is nauseous to me, but it gives them a very big practice."

"I know one doctor whose nurse says he tells every single one of his patients that they wear the very cutest outfits he's ever seen. That's getting clientele by charlatanism."

Finally, a first choice doesn't necessarily have to be the last, Parkinson said. "We live in a free country"

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